

Dr. Peterson

USG Presidents' Panel: Executive Leadership Institute

8:15 p.m. Monday, Sept. 30, 2013, Hyatt Regency Suites, Marietta

Thought starters:

I have had the honor of having several executive leadership institute scholars join me for a typical day, whatever that is. I think that what they see is that while there are somewhat predictable seasons in the life of a university, much of what we do requires that you make a decision based on your best judgment, relying also on the wisdom and experience of those on your team. Sometimes, you are in uncharted territory. You go back to your values and your commitments, and act upon them.

Sharing one significant challenge that you overcame that helped you grow:

Possibly the requirement of speaking to so many groups and individuals (about 175 times a year), and that you profess that you are basically (or used to be) a private person. The requirement that you be an ambassador for Georgia Tech can be both energizing and draining.

The need to act fast (your comment about the average tenure of a university president)

Example of taking a strong stand: *(3 possible suggestions)*

- Gun control
- The need for a tuition increase
- Immigration reform

Your comment about when you came to Tech you discovered it was really a series of 501(c)(3) organizations loosely tied together by an athletics program.

Your advice on leadership at the leaders' offsite on achieving One Georgia Tech:

“Leadership includes vision. In 10 years, what we accomplish will depend on what all of you do today — the people you work with, the students and faculty we attract, what we do on a daily basis, and how we work together as One Georgia Tech.

One GT won't just happen. We have to drive it.”

Your comments after “A Conversation Among Presidents”:

On April 25 I joined with several of my colleagues from universities in the Atlanta area to engage in a conversation about ethics. The discussion grew out of a challenge from Dr. William Foege, the 2012 recipient of Georgia Tech's Ivan Allen Prize for Social Courage, to emphasize the human-centered nature of science and technology while we conduct our research and our teaching, and in the way we do our jobs and equip the next generation to face some of the world's greatest challenges.

Ethics and compassion cannot be separated from science and technology. The driving force behind the discoveries in science and the applications in engineering and technology is the need to improve the human condition.

Dr. Foege is credited with leading the eradication of smallpox throughout the world. In doing so, he implemented a surveillance and containment method that had not been tested on a global scale. He was successful in Africa, in the face of criticism, and then in India, amidst even more criticism and political pressure. He also led the CDC's effort in an aggressive communication strategy about the AIDS virus shortly after it was discovered, at a time when many top leaders advised him not to.

The challenge, and the commitment needed, is to do the right thing, regardless. Ethics can be compared to tennis. Either it is in, or it is out. While there are many hard decisions along the way about which choice is the most ethical, a good leader's decision should never be whether or not to remain ethical.

If there were anything that could muddle the line, it would be compassion. We can look to Dr. Foege again for an example. Through leadership in the CDC, the Carter Center and the Task Force for Child Survival, he oversaw the eradication of Guinea worm disease, polio and measles, and the elimination of river blindness; and advocated policies that vastly accelerated childhood immunization in developing countries. While executive director of the Carter Center, he was a trailblazer in getting a pharmaceutical company to provide a drug invented to treat heartworm in dogs to be used overseas to treat river blindness in humans. Again, the move was controversial. We only need to look at the results. Twenty-seven million people in more than 23 African and Latin American countries are now being treated yearly. Several pharmaceutical companies are now providing free medicine to millions in developing countries.

While a global thinker, Dr. Foege is known for being able to see, and take into account, the faces of people. He once asked, “What is better than science?” His answer: “Better than science is science with heart, science with ethics, science with equity, science with justice.”